

# Boatload

Story by Heather Boyne

**Editor's note:** *U.S. Total Army Personnel Command officials in Alexandria, Va., recently reported that, Armywide, 3,800 soldiers became deserters in 2002, after they were absent without leave from their units for 30 days or longer. Of those, 3,275 returned to the Army "under military control."*

*PERSCOM officials said, too, that the number of soldiers who go AWOL could be considerably higher, because the cases of soldiers who are AWOL less than 30 days are not included in the statistics.*

FAILURE to adapt to the military environment, family problems, difficulty dealing with people and maintaining relationships, and loneliness and immaturity are some of the reasons why soldiers choose to desert the military, said Dr. G. Scott Middleton, a clinical psychologist at Womack Army Hospital at Fort Bragg, N.C.

Most soldiers who go AWOL are between the ages of 18 and 25, Middleton said.

"There's a reason why young soldiers are most prone to flee. An individual in his early 20s experiences what is known as a 'transition period,' or a time when he's trying to transition to becoming an adult," he said.

Going AWOL isn't necessarily an act of cowardice, but an action taken to correct what appears to be a mistake, that being that joining the Army wasn't the right thing for the individual to do, Middleton added.

"We need to better explain to young soldiers what it means to be in the military and introduce them to military culture," Middleton said. "Running away is the last course of action they should take."

Financial problems, fear of being deployed and homesickness are also reasons that contribute to going AWOL, Middleton said.

But soldiers should seek help from their chains of command if going AWOL is something they're considering, said CPT George Imorde, commander of the 82nd Airborne Division Replacement Detachment.

Soldiers should also speak to chaplains, post counselors and psychologists from post mental-health clinics and family support groups before making the choice to run away from a problem, Imorde added.

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The punishments for going AWOL not only affect the soldier's future military career, but also his life in the civilian sector.

"Don't think that all your options are over," Imorde said. "There will be someone who understands your problem. Going AWOL has never solved any problems; it has just added to them."

"From a military-justice standpoint, AWOL and desertion are among the more complicated offenses because the maximum punishments change, depending on such variables as how long the soldier was absent, whether he came back voluntarily and why he went AWOL in the first place," said MAJ Steve Cullen, the 82nd Abn. Div. chief justice.

For example, the punishment for the smallest offense, "failure to go to appointed place of duty," such as missing physical training, can result in forfeiture of two-thirds pay and confinement for one month.

The punishment for desertion can result in a dishonorable discharge, forfeiture of all pay and allowances and confinement for five years.

Soldiers are considered deserters when they remain AWOL for more than 30 days. When soldiers return to military control, they are usually charged with desertion and can be court-martialed for the offense.

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The other-than-honorable discharge can result in prejudice against the soldier in the future, such as during job searches and in social settings, Cullen said.

Many military benefits are lost following an AWOL conviction, Cullen added. The soldier can expect difficulty getting accepted into colleges and universities. And many employers won't hire a former soldier who has an OTH discharge.

"What soldiers don't realize is that they are better off serving out their terms, receiving college benefits and starting off fresh in the civilian world," said SSG Sean M. Bengé, a platoon sergeant with the 82nd Replacement Det.

Several soldiers who have gone AWOL agree it was the wrong choice.

"If you have problems and are thinking about going AWOL, you should talk to someone, because it's not worth the trouble you get yourself into," said a soldier who had gone AWOL for approximately 30 days and is now doing post details until he returns to civilian life.

Another soldier, who returned to active duty in the Army after being AWOL for three years, said that he made the decision to leave the military because of family problems that seemed insurmountable.

In the end, he believed he had made the wrong decision and advised other soldiers to think hard about what they are doing before they decide to desert the military.

"If you make your military term work, you can handle any situation that will arise in the civilian world," he said. "If you make the decision to go AWOL, you're just setting yourself up for failure down the road." ■

